The Pennsylvania German Dialect in Maryland

CYRUS H. ESHLEMAN

The endeavor will here be made to set forth the history and the outstanding peculiarities of the Pennsylvania German dialect as it was spoken in Washington County, Maryland. I say "was" spoken, for at present it is spoken by only a few of the older persons and is not even understood by most of the younger element. Its use a half-century ago when I was a child was confined, so far as I know, to the Mennonites, of whom there were four congregations not far south of the Pennsylvania line, to the north of Hagerstown, and in the vicinity, respectively, of the villages of Maugansville, Clear Spring, Leitersburg and Ringgold.

My people were all of this denomination, and I was taught the dialect before I learned English, the reason being that unless we learned it first we would not, so it was believed, learn it at all. The language was ridiculed and despised by most of the more numerous other elements around there, and we children were thoroughly ashamed of it ourselves, not knowing it was anything else but a vulgar nonsensical mixture of German and English.

And yet most of these other elements, largely of Lutheran and Reformed affiliations, were likewise of Pennsylvania German descent and their own ancestors a half-century or more farther back must have spoken the dialect. The birthplace of Henry Harbaugh, the famous dialect poet, is just across the Pennsylvania line only a few miles away, and this was the language in his home in his childhood, from, let us say 1817, the year of his birth, to about 1830. But by 1880 the Lutheran and Reformed adherents and their children had completely discarded the dialect and had apparently forgotten its ancestral existence. And it is probable that the dialect as their ancestors spoke it was somewhat different from that among the Mennonites, for they came from various localities in eastern Pennsylvania, whereas the Mennonites came almost exclusively from Lancaster County and, like the people there, were of Swiss descent.

These Mennonites moved over into Washington County mainly from about 1790 to 1840. Occasional families have moved over later, there have been a good many intermarriages, and there has been much exchange of visiting.

Their dialect was nearly identical with that of the Lancaster County element, who discontinued their Swiss dialect, probably about the time they immigrated, and adopted that of the more numerous Palatine settlers in the counties farther north, though retaining a number of Swiss words and forms. But there were noticeable differences in Washington County, even as compared with those of Lancaster County, with which, however, I shall not be concerned here.

I have been away from Washington County about 35 years and must rely partly on memory. But I have revisited the people a number of times, and by correspondence I have secured detailed answers to questionnaires. My list of differences will not be exhaustive, nor will it be technical. It will merely give the important differences that are noticeable to one who hears or reads the two varieties of expressions. As compared with the more distinctively Palatine dialect that has been appearing for years in the Allentown (Pa.) Morning Call, and more recently in the "Pennsylfawnisch Deitsch ECK," or section, in the Saturday issue of that newspaper, the outstanding peculiarities of the Washington County dialect are these: we always said **wella**, never **wolle—mer wella esse** (we want to eat). We said **alsfert**, never **immer** for always. We said **dihr** for second person plural, not **ehr**, as for example in **Dihr sinn jung** (You are young), **Dihr Kinner sinn jung** (Your children are young). We said **yah**, never **yar**, for yes; **velleicht** (v'leicht) not **verleicht** for perhaps; **wege**, not **waeich** for about; **zwische**, not **zwischich** for between; **Kiwwel**, not **Eemer**, for bucket or pail. We used the Swiss diminutive **li** sometimes, meaning something small, and rarely the Palatine **el**. We used the adjective **klee** or **glee** a good deal, **klee Boppeli** (little baby), **Hammeli**, or **Hammi**, or **glee Hammi** (calf).

Other peculiarities could be given. Altogether they make the vernacular noticeably different. Several correspondents at Allentown have insisted to me that nearly all these words and forms are used there too as alternatives. This may be true, but in Washington County they were used exclusively. Several of these usages are Swiss, **li**, **dihr**, and **wella**, at least. The others are met with in the Palatinate. How **yar** for **yah** (yes) originated, I can not say. Practically all the Washington County forms obtain also in Lancaster County, I am in a position to state positively from questionnaires.

I have sometimes hoped the several hundred persons in Washington County, Maryland, who still know the dialect, or could learn it from their parents, would start a movement to revive interest in it. A decided revival is undoubtedly under way in some sections of Pennsylvania, especially in and around Allentown. Should any in Washington County read this article I urge them to learn it if they have the opportunity before it is too late, and not to forget it if they know it. It is a real variety of German and is not, nor ever has been, a mere mixture of German and English. It is the dialect of the Palatinate in Germany, comprising the Rhenish plain west of Mannheim, Heidleberg, and Speyer and the mountain areas of the Haardt and the Westrich, all of which are now incorporated in the new province Saarpfalz. It is a High German dialect and a knowledge of it makes easy the acquirement of High German.

While all of us treasure our knowledge of English as our chief vehicle of expression, our lives will only be enriched and not narrowed if we also study the dialect of our ancestors and of German in general.

Lakewood, Ohio,
December, 1937.